



MANLY, YES, BUT I LIKE IT TOO

The life and loves of a girlfag

BY JILL NAGLE ILLUSTRATION BY AYA KAKEDA

"THERE'S SOMETHING SERIOUSLY wrong with us," my best friend said, as we sat in the Castro's hottest dessert spot, creaming amidst a gaggle of buff, denim-swathed fags. Our eyes lingered, glued to their man-butts, leather jackets, and white T-shirts skimming perky pecs. Their movements, laughter, and well-toned bodies distracted us, and we had a hard time focusing on our own conversation, let alone the carrot cake and chocolate mousse in front of us. Meanwhile, the sexy specimens themselves just gossiped, dished, and spooned gelato, ignoring us completely, as if we were nothing but a pair of tickets to the Superbowl.

But it wasn't just their sculpted glutes that riveted our attention. It was the sheer fact that these men have sex with other men, which we both find to be a giant turn-on. We call ourselves "girlfags": women who are fully aware—and proud—of the fact that nothing gets a rise in our girl boners more than the culture, and bodies, of gay men.

Make no mistake about it: we are not, I repeat not, fag hags. I did that in high school. Fag hags hang out with gay men, follow them to their discotheques, go to their parties, com-

miserate about their respective boyfriends, and let the gay men fix or give advice on their hair and makeup. Sometimes they fall in hopeless, unrequited love with the men. They certainly don't have sex, let alone relationships, with them. This is something else entirely. This, Virginia, is about sex.

As a bisexual woman, I view a greater variety of people as potential sexual partners than most folks do. Yet, it's the one type of partner you might think was least available to me—gay men—that I feel most compelled by. For one thing, there's something really hot about the way fags go about it all. I have always been inspired by—and perhaps, somewhat jealous of—the ease with which gay men enter into, partake of, and leave a sexual scenario. A few grunts or spare sentences seems to be all it takes to negotiate a sexual encounter.

"Hey."

"Tsup?"

"Y'wanna go over there?"

"Uh-huh."

And with that, the fun can begin, unspoiled by actual personalities shining through. That kind of anonymity allows for a good amount of projection and fantasy, excellent foreplay for an

optimal one-time encounter.

Women, on the other hand, tend to talk, ask questions, socialize, bond emotionally, and process. While these are all fine activities in their own right, when you just want to get down to business, they can get in the way.

What's also so appealing is the fact that gay men seem to be free of the sexual hang-ups, particularly about women, that so often plague straight men. In my early dating years, I frequently felt suffocated by the constraints of the heterosexual script. While I liked men and felt attracted to their bodies, I wasn't sure that what they saw when they looked at me had anything to do with me. I didn't feel like a "lady," so when someone held a door, pulled out a chair or brought me flowers, I often became uncomfortable, as if I was being asked to play a role for which I never auditioned.

Moreover, I noticed that the young men who seemed interested in me started treating me very differently once we got sexually involved. Either they began to act like they owned me, or they assumed I was public property available to any man who desired me, and told their friends the good news. Neither option pleased, let alone aroused me. In fact, those

behaviors made me want to run.

I quickly learned that most straight men bought into a set of silly rules that was absolutely not fun for me, and left me no room to play without punishment. Gay men, on the other hand, seemed completely free from this whole ridiculous mess. To be a gay man was to enjoy your birthright to sex, without censure—at least not from your fellow cavortees. Who wouldn't want to be a fag?

It wasn't only straight men who fell prey to a restrictive set of rules regarding sex—many lesbians also seemed to be bound by certain limiting assumptions about sexuality. Gay and lesbian culture provide stark contrasts of how men and women get socialized. For example, in major urban centers, a man can walk into a variety of establishments, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and find horny, naked guys available for sex. By contrast, where I live in San Francisco, Oseto Women's Bathhouse is the one place women can go to get naked with each other. But

women—who desired me sexually?

Over the years I've found I'm not alone in my frustration with the gap between the sexual freedom gay boys allow each other and the relatively cramped spaces women get accorded by both straight men and lesbians. As I've become more and more a part of these like-minded communities, I've been able to sample not only the spirit, but also the flesh of gay men, satisfying my girlfag lust on an even deeper level. At mixed-gender queer sex parties, for example (very different phenomena from straight "swingers" parties), I've had the opportunity to play sexually with self-identified gay men who were actually latently bisexual, spontaneously curious, or simply into the kinkiest thing around, which, when you've been with only men for over a decade, could well be getting it on with a member of the (gaspl) opposite sex.

Since I look unabashedly femme (full, round breasts, long hair, girly features), I don't have

dreamed possible turned out to be willing to experiment, to play, and even to date me for periods of time.

Victoria Heilweil, a 37-year-old photographer, once asked one of the numerous gay men who have hit on her why he was attracted to her (but hardly ever any other women), and he replied that she talked about men the same way gay men did. "I have a rawness and openness to my sexuality that seems to be closer to gay men," Victoria adds. Exclusively attracted to men physically, Victoria identifies with the term "girlfag." "Most of my female friends are lesbians, and rather than thinking of me as the token straight girl, I am the token fag of the group (their words). Gay men are familiar to me and I am familiar to them. I'm not sure I even understand it completely, or can describe it in words, but the first time someone called me a girlfag, it just fit."

My sister's friend Jen, a very sexy woman and former stripper, mostly hetero, also admits

The sexual world of gay men is still worlds apart from that of the hip straight girl who is trying to be accepted for her rampant, luscious babe self.

in the lobby, there's a big, foreboding sign that proclaims: "No Sexual Activity Allowed."

Of course, I can think of plenty of reasons why women might treat sex as something they should be protected from, as the sign at Oseto suggests. In fact, so many women in this culture have survived sexual abuse, harassment, and rape, it's a wonder more of us haven't tried to outlaw sex entirely. Women also get pregnant and face damning stigmatization and censure for overt sexuality in ways men do not. We are much more likely to believe we need sex-free space in order to feel "safe." But, oh—to pursue and be pursued without such fear! That is the coattail of gay male culture that so tempts me to ride it, long and hard.

When I started hanging out with my first gay male friend, Joe, the rush of freedom in having an emotional connection with an attractive man who had no palpable sexual agenda for me made me positively high. It was as if he was another species, or at least another gender entirely—one that I found extremely appealing. Why couldn't I capture this sense of expansiveness, joy, and freedom with men—and

that ambiguously gendered "boy" look that helps some biological females attract the fags they lust after. Instead, I think the fag attitude I've picked up over the years is what's perked up the ears—and other organs—of some of the "homo" boys who've landed in my lap.

More than once, I've been the lone bio-babe in a steaming hot tub, circle jerk, or Rube-Goldbergian array of pumping bodies with other women hanging back or absent entirely. My behavior, brazen for a woman but normal for a man in that context, was the ticket.

I've had many a gay male lover or play partner tell me that I "don't act like a 'normal' woman," which somehow gave them permission to approach me sexually. In other words, my overtly (though I hope respectfully) flirting with and sexualizing them, even though they are clearly "gay," talking openly about sex and the specifics of my lust for queer men, and relating experiences with other "gay" men, opens the door for them to consider me a potential sexual partner. With those behaviors, I clearly demonstrate that I don't need protection from sex any more than they do. More gay men than I ever

to having a yen for gay men, and has had a fair share of them in her bed. Says Jen, "I am no respecter of orientation."

For some of my more mainstream sisters, however, it has not been so easy to act on their girlfag tendencies. The sexual world of gay men is still worlds apart from that of the hip straight girl who is trying to be accepted for her rampant, luscious babe self from an equally hip straight guy. The problem is, it's hard to find such a guy. Says Marina, 29, "Most of the guys I've ever dated are strange around sex. Guys are supposed to want it, but they act like there's something wrong with me if I want it more. What's that about?" Evelyn, 34, a therapist, says, "Even some of my intelligent, educated male clients would rather not know the level of their wives' and girlfriends' sexual knowledge, experience, and even desire."

Which brings me to my personal solution: bisexual men. Rather than give up on men entirely, the men I've dated for any length of time over the last decade or so have been almost exclusively bisexual. Having traveled in both worlds, I find that many of them bring the best of each to the table when sitting down with a sex-

ually empowered woman. In general, I've found bi guys to be more aware of their bodies, more sexually literate and skilled, more willing to take responsibility for safer sex, and more likely to embrace egalitarian rather than chivalrous notions of what's acceptable for women (namely, anything and everything acceptable for men). I've also found them to be better groomed and to have fashion sense superior to straight men.

When female friends of mine have complained about the stereotypical behaviors of male dates and boyfriends, I find that their complaints about "men" tend to be about straight men. I've suggested that my female friends practice a form of separatism as a solution, that is, seeking out and dating only bi men for a while as a bit of vacation from the hetero norm, but many straight women get squeamish at this notion, and apparently would far rather tangle with the backward, non-reflective straight males they complain about as if those guys were their only option.

But all is not lost, as sometimes the fag of our dreams just happens to be a very special straight boy. Some men who are heterosexual by orientation have developed a "queer sensibility," that is, an identification with some aspects of queerness, causing them to relate to their own gender and sexuality—and that of women—in more fluid ways. I've met a number of these men at bisexual gatherings in the past—my impression is that they embrace the bisexual identity as an alternative to the constraining options available in popular culture. Whether or not they actually get it on with other guys can then become less important. Victoria also has been attracted to and involved with "heterosexual men who are open and experimental with their gender" in addition to the many gay men who have sashayed her way.

Myself, I wound up marrying a guy who, though open to a variety of my sick and twisted ideas, wouldn't really miss dick if it never again graced his orifi. I do have to admit, though, that when he cleaned out his drawers and his years-lapsed membership to the local gay bathhouse fell out, we fantasized for days about sneaking me in so I could watch him with all the horny men. Because, like our gay male brethren, we understand that the pursuit and enjoyment of sex is part of the fabric of everyday life. I'll always be grateful for this one relative freedom that is now and forever a part of my sexual landscape. ■

WHO'S THAT GIRLFAG?

Meet the women who like their men to have boys on the side

by Clare T. Rampling

Sometime around 1985, I remember picking up a copy of *Men in Love* by Nancy Friday. It was full of a whole spectrum of stories of men's sexual fantasies, and it was both educational and hot. In the chapter "Women with Women" she describes the very common male fantasy of watching two women together. However, she writes, "If a woman did have a fantasy about sharing her bed with more than one man, it would certainly not be a scenario of her watching two men perform with each other." I was horrified! The fantasy of watching two men together had been a favorite of mine for years—was I really that far out there?

A few years later my interest in gay men had expanded far beyond the simple fantasy of just watching them—I wanted to watch them and be like them, be close to them, have sex with them, love them. For me it was about physical and emotional and social desires. Imagine my relief, then, when I read a book in which Carol Queen wrote, without apology, that "A man only really started to interest me after he'd had a dick in his mouth." Oh wow—that's me too, I thought. And if there were two of us, there must be more. Once I realized that there were other women out there who were strongly and deeply attracted to gay men and gay male culture, I resolved to find them.

In September 2000, I created an email list and started www.girlfags.com, as a site to coordinate info about the topic. The list grew fantastically, and soon had well over a thousand members. It helped me to learn a lot about my fellow girlfags and what we had in common. For the website and email list, I provided a definition: a girlfag is a woman who is very attracted to gay/bi men. She may (or may not) also feel she is (fully or partly) a "gay man in a woman's body." Girlfags may identify primarily as bi or straight or lesbian, and are often attracted to more types of people than just gay/bi men. Eventually I started calling "girlfag" an "orientation flavor," since it was a taste preference that existed in addition to one's sexual orientation.

From the email list, I discovered that many girlfags agreed with me that we were interested in gay and bi men for far more than just sex. We wanted to have gay-styled relationships with them, too. We wanted relationships with a basic equality (free choice of roles) and queer style that gay men had. It was liberating (and hot) to realize that a woman (girlfag) and man (mostly gay) could have a gay old time together.

Some girlfags are turned on by casual male affection, such as kissing and tender touches. Others like raunchy, hot, gay sex. Some girlfags just want to see pictures or watch gay porn, others want to participate in person. Some girlfags want to fantasize about gay men, others want to have a monogamous relationship with a gay-acting bi man, still others want to have open relationships with multiple partners. We girlfags are very diverse in our desires and our ways of satisfying them.

One common way that we girlfags seek to satisfy our girlfag (and other) sexual and relationship desires is through embracing polyamory. Polyamory is a word for "honest non-monogamy." One girlfag asked me how I can expect a gay man to give up his primary interest—gay men—to settle down with me. As a polyamorous girlfag, I answer that I don't have to ask him to do that. In fact, I encourage him to seek out other men. Whether or not he shares those other men with me, I embrace his gayness and the happiness that these other men give him. And I relish the freedom I have to seek out other men, too (including the occasional very special straight man!), or other women. (I especially enjoy other girlfags.) Although not all girlfags are polyamorous, so far this appears to be the most prevalent relationship orientation among us.

One very lucky thing for girlfags is that many bi men are ecstatic to find us. Some bi men wonder how they'll ever find a woman who could understand about their "gay side." To find that there's a group of women who not only understand but embrace their gayness is a marvelous revelation. Some girlfags (and their "concerned" friends) worry that girlfags just want what they cannot have. But, very happily, that is most emphatically not the case, and more and more girlfags and gay/bi men are finding each other all the time. In the diversity of sexual orientation and tastes and relationship styles and preferences, there's even room for girlfags.

A version of this essay was originally published in *Curve* magazine in 1998.